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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001634

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TAGS: PREL MASS PTER RS GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: READING MISHA'S MIND: WHY A NEW DEFENSE  
MINISTER NOW?

REF: TBILISI 1628

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1.** (C) Summary. Since President Saakashvili tapped Bacho Akhalaia to replace Dato Sikharulidze as Minister of Defense on August 27, speculation on Saakashvili's motivations have swept through Tbilisi. Senior Georgian officials have repeated to the Ambassador on multiple occasions in the last several days their concerns about the lack of discipline within the Georgian Armed Forces, a vulnerability that they believe could allow the Russians again to infiltrate the military, as they argue already occurred May 5 during the attempted tank commander mutiny at Mukhrovani. Sikharulidze is poised to remain a close associate of Saakashvili and remains popular with the rest of the government; however, he has been criticized for not paying enough attention to the inclinations of certain military leaders, particularly with regard to the Mukhrovani mutiny attempt. In conversations prior to Akhalaia's appointment, the Ambassador stressed emphatically the importance of continued reform efforts and expressed concern that the appointment of Akhalaia, with his background, could have a negative attempt on both Georgia's international reputation and our bilateral military cooperation. DFM Bokeria, who first told us that the appointment was coming, assured the Ambassador that a strong hand was needed at Defense, but that Akhalaia will also continue reforms necessary for eventual NATO integration.  
End Summary.

**¶2.** (C) Comment. This most recent move by Saakashvili seems to be motivated by his desire to establish a Ministry of Defense that is completely loyal to Georgia and to Saakashvili in order to keep the country safe from future Russian aggression, either overt or covert. Although Sikharulidze was and is viewed as personally loyal, Saakashvili was not satisfied with his reaction to the Mukhrovani incident and efforts to root out those responsible, as well as those who may the Government believes may be involved with further efforts to destabilize Georgia. With the appointment of Akhalaia, Saakashvili has sent a clear signal that an "enforcer" is in charge. Senior Georgian officials have urged the international community to suspend judgment -- and to judge him based on his actions, not his caricature-reputation. End Comment.

WHY CHANGE NOW?

**¶3.** (C) Since Akhalaia's August 27 appointment, local press, numerous NGO figures and non-parliamentary opposition leaders have expressed concern about his taking over at MOD. On August 30 DFM Giga Bokeria told the Ambassador that he understands why people are concerned about the nomination of the new Minister of Defense. However, according to Bokeria, the failed Mukhrovani mutiny was evidence of the threat that continues to be posed by Russia -- and that, although Sikharulidze is well-liked, he was not viewed as taking tough enough measures to root out those in the military who may be

disloyal to Georgia. Akhalaia is trusted by Saakashvili and his inner circle and is viewed by Saakashvili as effective. Bokeria stressed to the Ambassador that Akhalaia is "Misha's guy," not "Vano's guy" (Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili) and he urged the United States not to view this appointment as MOIA moving in on MOD turf.

¶14. (C) Saakashvili said publicly that he had appointed Akhalaia because he wants a "stricter hand" at the head of the MOD. Mukhrovani was a wake up call to the GOG. Rumors of the MOD. Mukhrovani was a wake up call to the GOG. Rumors persist that ethnically Georgian "thief-in-law" Tariel Oniani may have funded the failed revolt -- and it appears that senior members of the GOG fear Russian efforts to infiltrate military leadership through a less than firm MOD. The Minister of Internal Affairs told the Ambassador August 27 that Oniani was directly involved with the plotting behind the Mukhrovani mutiny attempt, along with several unidentified FSB officers. Merabishvili also told the Ambassador that he has reason to believe that Oniani has provided as much as USD 500,000 to Badri Bitsadze, the husband of non-parliamentary opposition leader Nino Burjanadze, through a channel in Armenia. (Embassy note: Merabishvili promised additional detail through liaison channels in the near future. Embassy will report more on Burjanadze via septel. End note.)

¶15. (C) Sikharulidze is expected to remain in the government as an advisor to Saakashvili -- and at a social event on August 30, the head of the President's administration joked with Sikharulidze and Embassy officers that she would ensure he received prime real estate for his new office in the Presidency. Sikharulidze seemed comfortable and confident

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with the government crowd. Bokeria told the Ambassador, "We all like Sikharulidze -- this isn't about him."

#### BACHO AKHALAIA BIOGRAPHY

¶16. (C) Well-known Tbilisi political analyst Gia Nodia (and former Minister in Saakashvili's government) described Akhalaia as "a guy who knows how to get things done." He graduated in 2004 from Tbilisi State University's Faculty of law. Akhalaia worked at the Liberty Institute from 2003 to 2004, and from 2004 to 2005 he served as Deputy Public Defender. In 2005 he began a three year appointment as the head of the Penitentiary Department of the Ministry of Justice, where he was criticized by former colleagues and outgoing Public Defender Sozar Subari for his performance. Akhalaia has been harshly criticized for his role responding to a 2006 prison riot in Tbilisi that ended with the death of seven inmates. In December 2008, Akhalaia was named a Deputy Defense Minister, a position he held until his appointment on August 27 as Minister of Defense. His brother Dato Akhalia is the head of the Constitutional Protection Department at MOIA.

TEFFT